

Morse School Annex
Sarah Street between 24th and 25th Streets
Pittsburgh
Allegheny County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5199

HABS

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MORSE SCHOOL ANNEX

HABS No. PA-5199

Location: Sarah Street between 24th Street
(formerly Caroline) and 25th Street
(formerly Oliver), running through
to Larkin Alley.

Present Owner: The Housing Authority of the City of
Pittsburgh, Civic Building, 200 Ross
Street, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15219.
Telephone: 412-456-5000.

Present Occupant: Unoccupied.

Present Use: Not in use.

Significance: The structure is a strange mixture of a
relatively new and daring structural con-
cept and a hopelessly outdated exterior
shell. It is a "mule" without pride of
ancestry nor hope of descendants. The use
of ferro-concrete slabs between engaged
steel beams had been used for the first
time by Ernest Leslie Ransome in the
Academy of Sciences Building at San
Francisco in 1890 - only fifteen years
before. (The system had been devised in
in England by Dr. Fox in 1829 and patented
in 1844). The Architect has used a system
therefore which was advanced for its day.

It is unfortunate that he was not as daring in his approach to the exterior which states "ARCHITECTURE" and "CIVIC". Thirty years before this William LeBaron Jenney had built the Leiter Building in Chicago with its bold expression of structure and glass screen openings. Twenty years before, H.H. Richardson had built the last noble gasp of Romanesque - The Marshall Field Department Store. The Architect could have followed either of these examples but chose not to.

In Europe, Auguste Perret had already built his buildings at 25 bis Rue Franklin, whose "Street Floor has almost been dissolved into Pure Glass". Tony Garnier had already published his "Cite Industrielle". Three years later Frank Lloyd Wright would build the Robie House. Six years later Walter Gropius would build his Fagus Works at Ahfeld a.d. Leine. There is no reflection of any of these in the present structure.

Actually the Architect failed to integrate his new structure into that of the adjoining "Main" Building. There is no physical connection between the old and new buildings with the exception of a pipe tunnel through the courtyard. Circulation between the two buildings was circuituous and open air.

The building is significant because it reflects a dichotomy which would persist and still persists - the wedding of a logical structural system and a hopelessly inappropriate "shell".

PART 1 HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

- (1) Date of Erection: 1905 or subsequent
- (2) Architect: No Record
- (3) Original and subsequent Owners: Board of Education, City of Pittsburgh
- (4) Builder, Contractor, Suppliers: No Record.
- (5) Original Plans and Construction: No Record
- (6) Alterations and Additions:
 - a) In 1923, toilets in the basement were completely re-constructed. The drawings were prepared "in house" by the Board of Education. The Architect was Charles B.Allison, R.A., Ass't. Superintendent of Buildings. At this time, the Building is referred to as "Morse School". It was apparently an Elementary School. It contained 4 Classrooms, a Manual Training School, a Drawing Room, a Cooking Room and a Kindergarten.
 - b) In 1932 new wood floors were installed in the "Wood Shop", (formerly Manual Training). By this time M.M. Steen was the Architect for the Board of Education.
 - c) In July 1938, extensive interior changes were made. The drawings are entitled "Preliminary sketches of Girls' Vocational High School - Alterations to Pre-vocational School". At this time the same classes in general are listed as in the previous drawings. M.M. Steen was still Architect.
 - d) In September, 1938, the Building was apparently further modified in use although not in construction to become completely a Girls' Vocational High School. M.M.Steen was still Architect.
 - e) In 1942, the structural framing at the Sarah Steet end was completely changed by the radical addition of new steel framing and subframing. This probably made necessary by a change in the educational system for WWII. The Basement now has an Engine Lathe Shop; the First Floor has an Ordinance Inspecting Room No. 4 and a Milling and Shaping Room; the Second Floor has a Drill Press Shop and Ordinance Inspection Rooms #1, #2, and #3. The Architect is M.M.Steen. (Paul Bott appears as Architect for changes made to the Main Building in 1966 and 1969 but there were apparently no changes made during his time of service).

- f) After World War II the war-time equipment and activities were removed from the School. Drawings for the main Building and for site work consistently refer to Morse Elementary School.
- g) As late as 1971 minor repair work was performed in both the Main Building and the Annex. On Feb. 17, 1972 drawings were prepared by the Board to close the entrances to both the Main Building and the Annex with chain link fence plus stud and plywood panels. Apparently the Board of Education ceased using the Buildings.

B. Historical Context:

The original owner of all the land in this area was one John Ormsby who had a warrant from the sons of William Penn. The entire area was sold to his son Oliver and eventually subdivided among his heirs (Oliver Street was named for Oliver Ormsby; Sarah and Caroline for his daughters).

Even in the early days of the Pittsburgh area some of the first steel mills were being built in the South Side, generally with Scotch or Ulster Irish money with Scotch-Irish furnishing the cheap labor of the time. This was followed by an influx of Germans. At the time of the purchase of property by the Board of Education for construction of the Annex in 1905, the three lots were purchased from Isaac Drake and Sarah Drake, his wife; Benedict Rederer and Wilhemina Rederer, his wife; Joseph Davis (unmarried). Since the turn of the century the entire area has become a Slavish ethnic enclave in the City, primarily Polish and Russian (in that order) plus specific neighborhoods of Slovenes, Croations, Serbs, Slovaks. St. Casimir Church, on Sarah Street at 22nd-2½ squares from the Morse School is one of the social and religious centers of this Slavish area.

As a result, although everybody is registered Democratic, the inhabitants are very conservative. They have an intense work ethic and this was probably reflected in the fact that the "Annex" was changed to a Girls' Vocational High School in 1938. They are also intensely patriotic. This feeling, coupled with the closeness of the major steel mills probably explains the shift of the school's activities to war-effect education in the 1940 era.

With the changes introduced to the Pittsburgh School system to achieve a racial balance, the existing school, for a number of reasons including its age and some consequent dangers, became one of those marked to be abandoned. Some ten years after it was closed, the entire property was made available to the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh, the present Owner.

PART II ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

A. General Statement

(1) Architectural character:

The structure is "Romanesque" in inspiration. Romanesque of Northern and Western Europe - a stone idiom translated into brick. The window to wall ratio has been increased to accommodate the need for natural illumination in the classrooms. The building was constructed in a historical period when only the most prominent Architects had studied or travelled abroad. The Architect of the present structure shows no sign of either. There is consequently an inconsistency of details, proportions and design elements - hip roofs combined with a huge, overpowering, pointless gable and a brutal entablature pointing for some reason toward the toilet room tower on the Main structure adjacent.

(2) Condition of fabric:

The condition of the fabric-both interior and exterior is deplorable. The wood and metal box gutter has leaked extensively. It is difficult to find an area of brickwork which is not covered with efflorescence. The mortar has washed out from the majority of joints. There has been some sporadic pointing over the entrance-very badly done. The stone lintels at the top floor have open joints at both ends where they have moved in relation to the masonry and jambs below have vertical open joints running down in some cases for twenty or more courses. At some time in the past the Board of Education has removed a console over the main entrance door. The marks and open support holes are clearly visible. The windows are completely covered with plywood so it is impossible to examine the exterior. From the interior however it is apparent that there is extensive rot. On the interior the wood floors are cupped, bowed and rotted. The majority of the interior paint has peeled to the basic plaster and in nearly all the upper rooms, ceiling plaster has fallen and plaster on the inside of the exterior walls has peeled and powdered back to the masonry walls. Interior wood doors, typically 5 panel, are in ruinous condition. The only interior items worth saving are the old stairs, newels, structural posts and handrails which are really quite handsome period pieces, in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

(1) Overall dimensions:

The average width of the building on Sarah Street is 45.69 feet. The length, parallel to 25th Street is 108.12 feet.

(2) Foundations:

The foundation walls, which extend up to the first floor window sills are rock-face stone ashlar approximately 1'-4" by 3'-4" on the face, laid in running bond and backed by masonry. The first floor is high enough above grade that the basement windows are totally above grade. In most cases the sill is one course above grade.

(3) Walls:

Walls are brick bearing walls.

(4) Structural system, framing:

The framing system is steel beams and intermediate members with reinforced concrete slabs. The framing for the first and second floors, front, was extensively strengthened in 1942 to take the additional weight of equipment used in the War-effort education classes.

(5) Porches, stools, balconies, bulkheads:

None of these occur. Even the front steps have no landing at their top. The top step is the sill of the door opening. There are indications that there was at one time a consul over the front door.

(6) Chimney:

The chimney is a steel industrial stack sitting about five feet north of the building, towering above the entire structure, and guyed back to the building wall.

(7) Openings:

a) Doorways and Doors:

The front entrance is approximately seven feet wide by nine and one-half feet high. The actual door is approximately five feet wide (double) by about seven and one-half high. There are stone jambs with carved moulds. There is a stone architrave with a dentil bed mould and projecting cornice. Above this is a semi-circular wood arch with a circular medallion or cartouche and carved plant forms on either side. The side door is more straight forward with a simple stone frame and a smaller architrave.

b) Windows and Shutters:

There are no shutters.

Windows on all three floors are set in deep recesses. The basement windows are nearly square in elevation, double hung. First Floor windows are high and relatively narrow with a window/wall ratio of 2/1 in width. Doors are double hung with a stone cross bar. Above the cross bar is a bottom hinged, in-swinging, semi-circular sash. There are six similar windows on the second floor, all occurring on the long side adjacent to the corners. The remainder of the second floor windows have a rectangular bottom hinged panel above the stone cross bar.

8. Roof:

a) Shape, covering:

The roof is basically rectangular with hips and one intersecting gable extending toward the Main Building. The roof is slate.

b) Cornice, Eaves:

The cornice and box gutter is wood with a metal gutter lining. The gable sits atop a decorative brick band which has three raised brick panels on the face. The architrave is wood with a brick dentil bed mould course. The gable has a brick infilling with a small circular window with brutal double brick band around it. The rake moulds are wood and once again there is a bed mould composed of brick dentils.

c) Dormers, cupolas, towers:

None of these occur. There are however skylights over the open stair well. On the roof adjacent to the ridge there are several "doghouses" which are louvered and serve as outlets for the old gravity classroom ventilation shafts.

C. Description of Interior.

1. Floor Plans:

See enclosed sketches.

2. Stairways:

Stairway is an open well with steel frames and stone sills. There are twin skylights to provide illumination. The metal railing is one of the few interior items in good enough condition to save.

3. Flooring:

Floors are typically wood installed on wood sleepers over the concrete structural slab.

4. Walls and ceiling finish:

Walls are plaster with a paint finish in ruinous condition. Front walls of classrooms have continuous slate chalkboards coming down to a wood panel wainscot which runs around all four walls. Ceilings are plaster directly on the bottom of the concrete floor slabs, painted. Steel beams have been enclosed in a plaster box for fireproofing. These project down below the ceiling surface for the full depth of the beams.

5. Openings:

a) Doorways and Doors:

Doorways have wood frames with applied wood trim and mouldings. There is a cross bar at the door head. The frame continues up to frame a bottom hinged glass panel which can be tilted in for ventilation. Doors have 5 horizontal panels, recessed, with an additional face mounted moulding. Both frames and doors have been repeatedly painted in various colors.

a) Windows:

Windows are double hung wood. In line with the frame over the ventilating panel above the doors there is heavy wood cross bar, approximately 8 or 9 inches in height. Above the cross bar there is a bottom-hinged in-swinging hopper glazed panel. In the square masonry openings the panel is rectangular. In the arched masonry openings, the hopper is semi-circular. In all cases the trim is rectangular and stops about three inches below the beam bottoms.

6. Decorative features and trim:

In the corridors and up the stair well there is a textured linoleum wainscot. The walls are painted above this wainscot. Panels have been defined on the painted surface by painting a dark band and using a two-part stencil in light color. The stencil has an "Art Nouveau" character. In the classrooms, as noted above, there are wood wainscots about 2 foot high on all four sides of the room. At the top of the transom frame there is a small wood picture mould on all four walls.

7. Hardware:

Doors have 1-1/2 pairs of metal butts which have been painted out with the frames. All other hardware has been removed.

8. Mechanical:

a) Heating, air conditioning, ventilating.

Heating was originally by coal fired hot water boilers, with a multitude of 12 tube cast iron radiators under the windows. There never was any air conditioning. Primary ventilation was by the use of the double-hung windows and the hoppers above the doors and windows. There were two vertical shafts on the east wall of the stair serving as gravity relief vents which continued up and discharged through two louvered doghouses on the west side of the roof ridge.

With the passage of the local clean air regulations, the boilers were converted to gas.

b) Lighting:

Classroom lighting was provided by six industrial type circular reflector bowls, enameled white on the reflector surface and brown on the hood. Fixtures were suspended on pendants from exposed conduit. In some rooms the conduit was mounted directly on the bottom of the beams and ran lengthwise in two rows. In other rooms the conduit was run on the bottom of the concrete slab and brought down around the beams in a "U" shape. We suspect, although we cannot prove it, that the rooms were originally lighted with gas fixtures.

c) Plumbing:

Probably none of the present fixtures are original. In 1923 the boys' and girls' toilets in the Basement were extensively revised. Fixtures were removed, replaced and relocated. At various times sinks were added and later removed, etc.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation:

The "Annex" is located to the west of the original Main Building. Its west and south walls are located on the property lines. The front entrance wall is approximately 12 feet from the property line. The long dimension of the building runs north-south with windows on the North, East and South Walls. The West Wall is a 3 story solid brick wall without a single opening.

2. Historic Landscape Design:

There was no landscape design. The entire lot was paved. Even today the only green to break the harsh lines is the urban weed growing along the fence where the paving has deteriorated.

3. Outbuilding:

None.

PART III SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original Architectural Drawings:

- | | | |
|------|----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| (1) | 1923 - Revisions to Toilets in Basement. | |
| (2) | 1926 - Relocation 2nd. Floor Partitions | (A) |
| (3) | 1930 - New Equipment Layout | (A) |
| (4) | 1932 - New Food Floors - Wood Shop | (B) |
| (5) | 1935 - Paving & Cement Sidewalk | (B) |
| (6) | 1938 - Alterations to Provocational School | (B) |
| (7) | 1938 - Preliminary - Girls' Vocational High School | (B) |
| (8) | 1939 - Final " " " " | (B) |
| (9) | 1940 - Asphalt Paving | (B) |
| (10) | 1940 - New Stack | (B) |
| (11) | 1942 - Reinforcing First & Second Floors, Front | (B) |
| (12) | 1942 - War-effect Revisions to Space USP | (B) |
| (13) | 1971 - Alterations to class Spaces | (C) |
| (14) | 1972 - Plywood Bulkheads at Doors | (C) |

Note: All drawings were prepared by the Pittsburgh Board of Education "In House".

The Architects were:

- | | |
|-----|-------------------------|
| (A) | Charles B. Allison R.A. |
| (B) | M.M. Steen, R.A. |
| (C) | A. DeGiovanni, R.A. |

The Board of Education had another Architect, Paul Bott between Messers Steen and DeGiovanni but no work was done on the Annex during his tenure.

B. Early Views:

None

C. Interviews:

None

D. Bibliography:

None

E. Likely sources not yet investigated:

None

F. Supplemental Material:

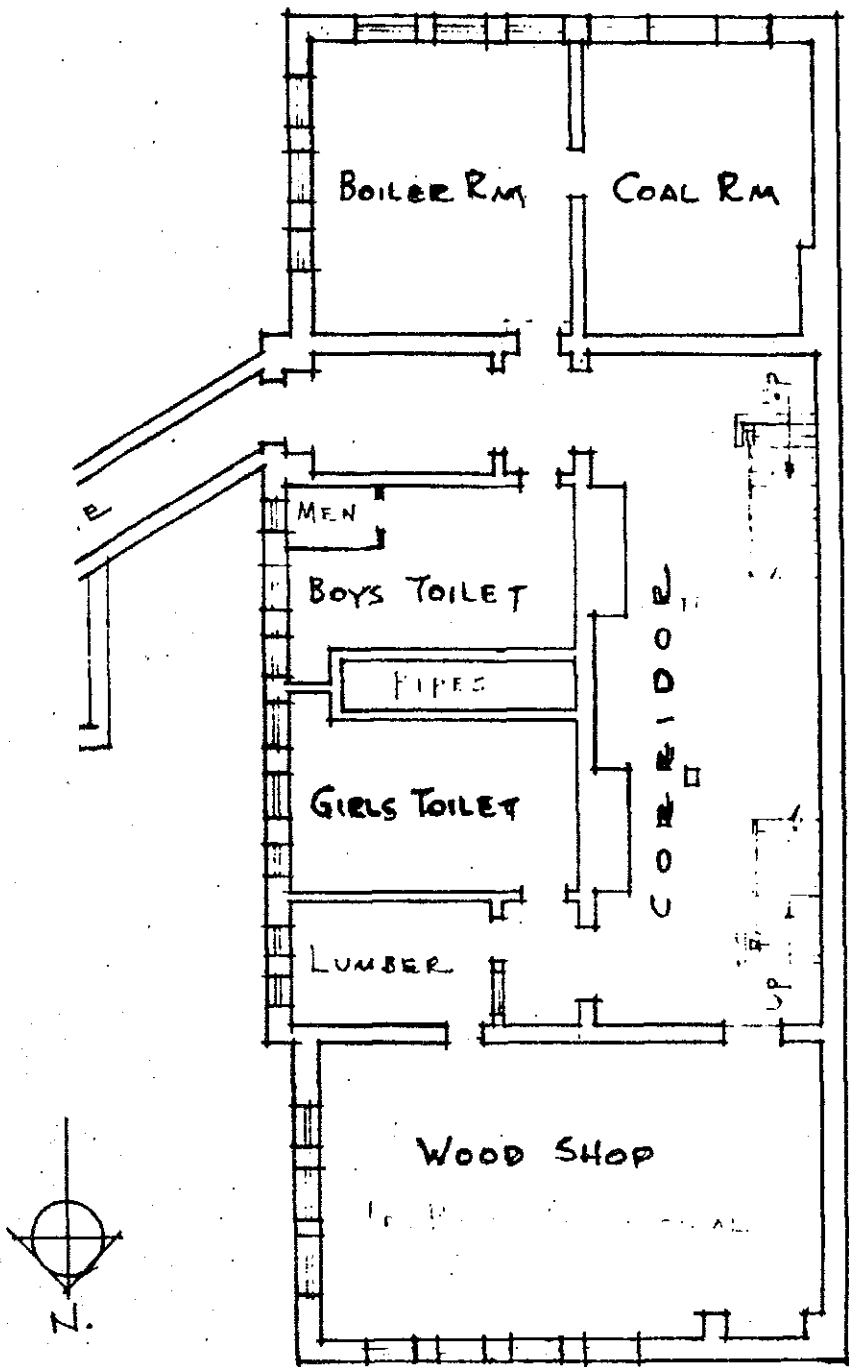
None

Prepared by:

Paul Charles Apostolou
Architect
Paul Charles Apostolou & Associates
July 23, 1982

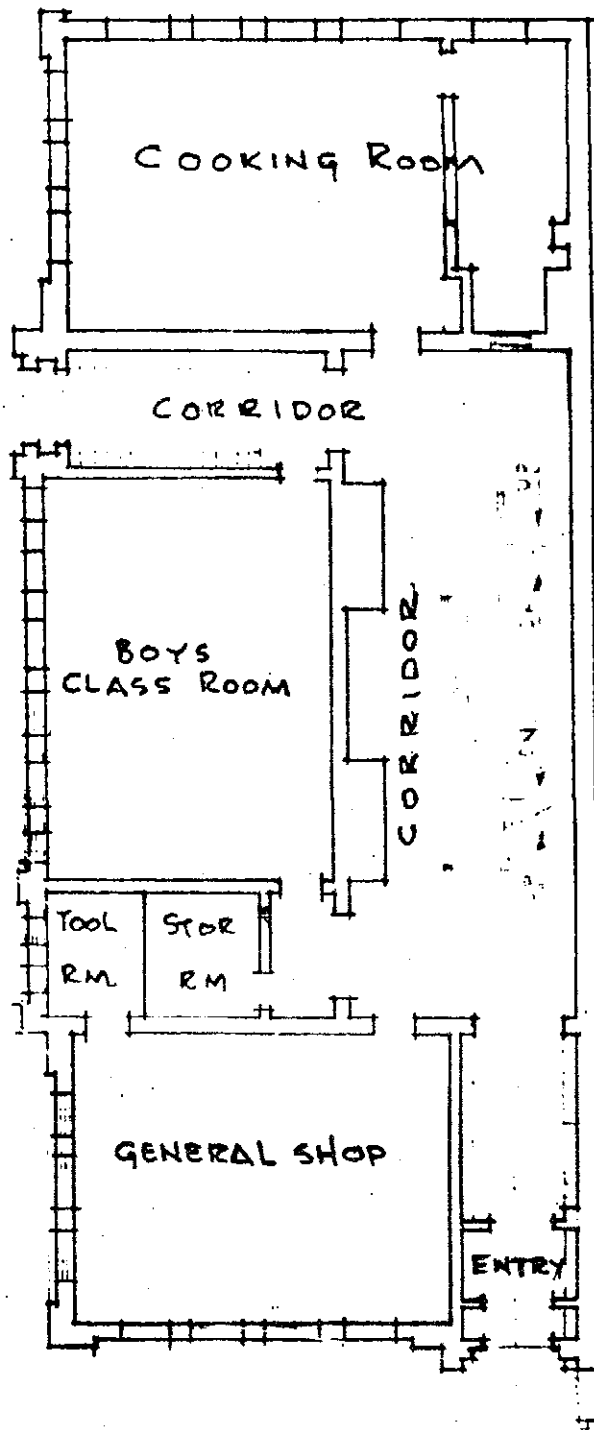
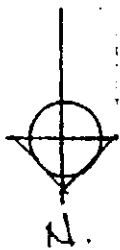
PART IV - PROJECT INFORMATION

The Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh proposes to erect a High-Rise Structure for the Elderly on the Site. The old Morse School will remain in use, being converted to house 30 Apartments. The building described in this Document, the "Annex" will be demolished and the Housing Authority will erect a new 5 story structure using this site plus the adjoining pieces of property to have an additional 40 Apartments.

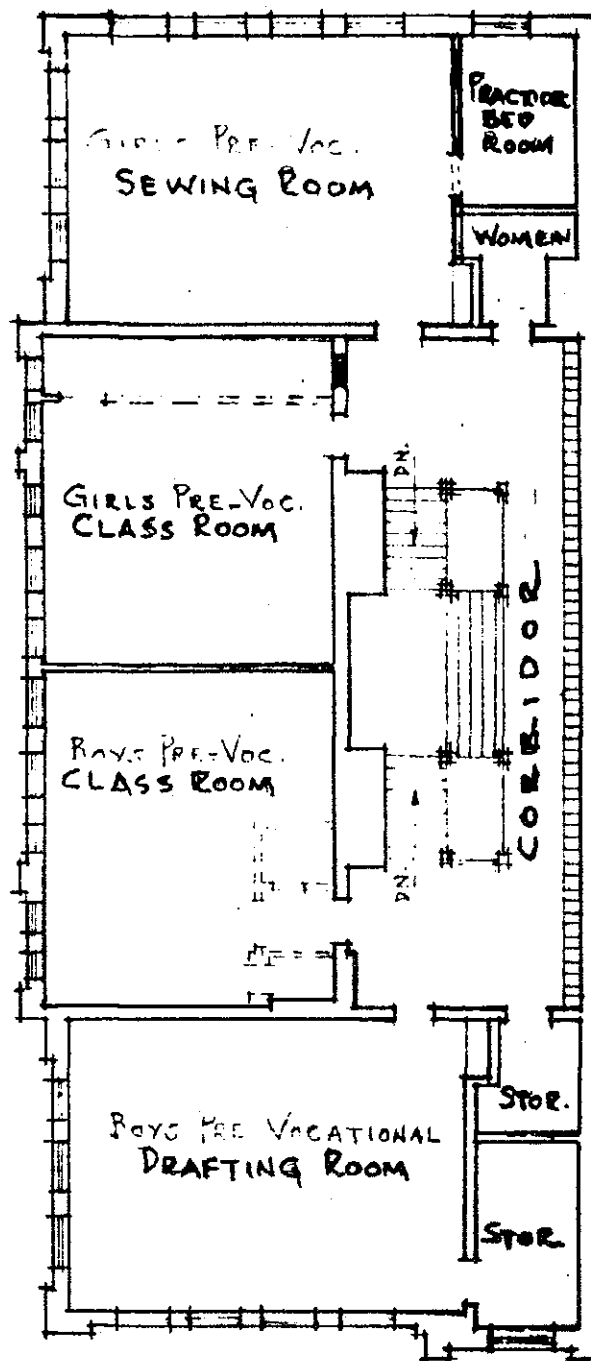
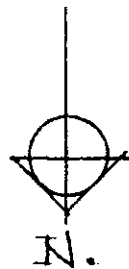


BASEMENT FLOOR PLAN

FOR GENERAL SCHOOL



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN:

